

THE LOST FATHER

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The word “gospel” is an Old English translation of Greek words meaning good news. Scraping off all the barnacles of commercialism, Christmas is a day for celebrating the birth of someone who brought profound spiritual good news. So I thought we might try a fresh look at what that good news was. What were those roses that the radical Christian mystic, Dorothee Soelle, rhapsodized about in the words we borrowed for our call to worship this evening – those roses “that fooled the earth and began to blossom in the snow”?

There certainly was nothing rosy about Jesus’ birth. He was from Nazareth, an insignificant village of unlettered country people near the Sea of Galilee, far from Jerusalem. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asked an astounded Nathaniel when Philip urged him to join those following Jesus.

His parents were Joseph, a carpenter, and Mary, an ordinary village teenager. Ordinary, save for one extraordinary fact: after becoming engaged to marry Joseph, Mary turned up pregnant, begotten upon by an unknown father. If there was any buzz about the newborn, it was this. The illegitimacy of the birth of Jesus, which we need not characterize any less delicately here this evening, is a historical fact. It is glaringly evident in the scriptural gymnastics engaged in by the gospel writers to obscure it.

The most obvious of these headstands is the story of the virgin birth. From within the convenient ambiguity of the passive voice, Matthew writes, almost offhandedly, that Mary “was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.” As if everyone suddenly noticed that she was great with child and said, “hmmm, looks like Mary and the Holy Spirit have been busy.” And then went back to whatever they were doing. The timing of Jesus’ birth in relation to Mary’s engagement to Joseph had to be accounted for somehow. Pre-Christian virgin birth stories were an available resource.

But why do the circumstances of Jesus’ birth matter? Our own Joseph Priestley, a radical English Unitarian, provides the logical answer that they do not matter at all. Critiquing the Christian church’s virgin birth story – which got his house burned down, by the way – Priestly observed: “When the excellency of the person of Christ is brought into view, in the New Testament, it is always referred to his spirit and conduct in real life, never to any peculiar circumstances of his conception and birth Jesus is precisely the same -- in his person, character, and office -- whether the miraculous conception be true or false” And of course this enlightened, fair-minded logic applies with the same force to the real-world fact of Jesus’ illegitimate birth. . . . But there is so much more to religion than abstract logic.

In the culture into which Jesus was born, illegitimacy was a kind of indelible status crime. It was no biographical footnote, but rather, a condemnation sewn into his clothing like a scarlet letter.

As reflected in the Book of Deuteronomy, a person of illegitimate birth, a “mamzer” in Hebrew, was denied admission to the national assembly, and likewise his children for ten generations -- regardless of their own legitimacy. His rights of inheritance, public office-holding, and participation in judicial processes were denied or disputed. The word “mamzer” was among the very worst insults. From the playground through the growing up years in a small village and onward into his ministry, we can be confident that Jesus was regularly subjected to such scorn. The idea that such a child could grow up to be a religious leader, or even a person of ordinary decency, was inconceivable.

In an encounter with a Jewish faction, recounted in the Book of John, Jesus invokes Abraham to call on them to respect his teachings. They deflect his religious argument by responding, “We were not born of fornication. We have one father: God.” The insinuation is quite clear.

In another encounter, during his unsuccessful ministry in Nazareth, Jesus’ audience reacts scornfully, saying “Where does this fellow get such stuff? What makes him so wise? Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” [pause] Yeshu ben Miriam – Jesus, son of Mary. In the idiom of the day, to refer to a man as the son of his mother, rather than his father, was a clear imputation of illegitimacy, an intentional insult that among the gospel writers only Mark had the courage to retain.

These indignities surely made it monumentally difficult for Jesus to forgive his mother, whose moral errancy severely burdened his life and ministry. We see this reflected in the edgy quality of his comments about parents in general; and likewise in the encounter between Jesus and Mary in which she sends a message to him at a meeting, saying that she and his brothers are seeking him. Jesus responds, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and gesturing to those around him, he answers his own question: “These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.” After all the possible prophetic justifications for this statement have been considered, it is still gratuitously harsh. Except, of course, that it is entirely to be expected, given Jesus’ struggle with illegitimacy.

We don’t have an explicit record of Jesus expressing forgiveness to or about Mary. But we do have one very revealing story. In his excellent study, The Gospel According To Jesus, Stephen Mitchell states that this story is accepted by the best scholars as “having all the earmarks of historical veracity.” Jesus was teaching in the Temple at Jerusalem, very near the end of his life. A crowd brought a woman to him, with the report that she had been caught in the act of adultery. Citing the law of Moses as calling for stoning her, they asked Jesus what he thought. He responded with the now well-known maxim, “let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” and turned away. The crowd dispersed. He looked around and asked the woman, “Has no one condemned you?” She responded, “no one.” He replied, “I don’t condemn you either. Go now, and sin no more.”

Is it plausible, or really even possible, that Jesus could have had this encounter without seeing in it a representation, a re-presentation, of the encounter that occurred between his own mother and stepfather before his birth? Or that he could have so compartmentalized the spirit of forgiveness that pervades this story as to leave his anger at his mother unfazed? I say no. At some point before or during this encounter in the Temple, he experienced a transcendence of the wound inflicted by his illegitimate birth; and with that transcendence, he experienced an open-hearted forgiveness of Mary.

This shows Jesus to be a remarkable human being. But I think he had help. In fact, I believe he might never have come to this transcendence without that help, which came from his stepfather, Joseph.

Joseph's appearances in Christian scripture are scant. He has no lines. The gospel writers depict him as an unthreatening older man who serves mainly to link Jesus to the lineage of King David, and to accept meekly an angel's order that he play the role of Mary's husband and protector. If we remove the political and supernatural elements from the Nativity story, though, we see a very different Joseph.

As a typical husband-to-be, his reaction to the news of Mary's pregnancy undoubtedly was an intense and maybe even explosive feeling of wound and betrayal. All cultural energies were flowing away from accepting Mary. We are not privy to what happened inside Joseph. We know only that the outcome was for him to see Mary clearly as the errant pregnant teenager she was, and to accept her.

Without his love and protection, Mary would have been an outcast -- might not even have survived to give birth to Jesus. Even if born, Jesus, in turn, might not have survived to adulthood. There would have been no model for Jesus' own spiritual struggle to forgive his mother. And there would have been no male source of love, untainted by the illegitimacy itself, saying to Mary's son, "I accept you exactly as you are."

From all these losses there would have flowed the loss of a model for the shaping of Jesus' ministry around the value of forgiveness. As the poet William Blake observed, most of the moral virtues preached by Jesus have clear antecedents in earlier thinkers. Singular among them, forgiveness was the gospel, the good news.

Forgiveness requires giving up the need to have a past different from the one you have -- or put differently, giving up the yearning to go back to the past you had before you were wounded by whomever you need to forgive. This yearning reflects, ironically, a hope of restoring right relation, which is always a casualty when we wound, or are wounded by, another. Vengeance -- either actively or in the passive form of holding a grudge -- holds out the promise of rebalancing the books, as in the old expression, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

But it never works, because he who wounded us of course did not see his action as unbalancing the books. On the contrary, he saw it as a fully justified balancing of the books, based on some pre-existing wrong that he himself vainly hoped to right by taking vengeance.

Whatever right relation existed before the wound that needs forgiving is gone forever. The only way out is not backward but forward, toward a new one. Otherwise we remain stuck perpetually between the old one and any possible new one, repeating the cycle of violence, sin, and wounding.

The letting go required by forgiveness opens the doors to the heart, enlarges the soul. This is the only way to transcend the wounded past. We talk about healing spiritual wounds, but the actual dynamic is more like rendering them inconsequentially small by making the soul exponentially larger. This allows an inner spaciousness where we can meet again the one who wounded us or was wounded by us, released from the limitations of the wounding encounter. Where together we can make a joyful noise greater than ourselves, to be worthy of the lesson: all duly noted, all forgiven.

If we cannot get to the letting go, the heart will remain closed where the wound was inflicted. The wound will begin to consume and corrupt the unforgiving person. More wounds will follow whenever anyone comes along who resembles the unforgiven person, closing more doors to more and more of the heart. As Stephen Mitchell observes, “a corrupted heart is like a room cluttered with valuable possessions, in which the owner sits behind a locked door, with a loaded gun.”

Although forgiveness was the signature good news of the ministry of Jesus, it was not the ultimate objective. Forgiveness is crucial because without it, we cannot be fully present. Without it, we are still fighting the last war. Jesus saw that when we are fully *in* the present, we can see the truth with unclouded eyes. When we see the truth that others are, and they see us in the same light, a mutual love breaks into life as an irresistible force. All doors are flung open.

As Nietzsche declared, for Jesus the Kingdom of God was “not something one waits for; it has no yesterday and no tomorrow, it doesn’t come in ‘a thousand years’ – it is an experience that takes place inside the heart; it is everywhere; it is nowhere.” When we are fully in the present, we can step into this enveloping energy of unconditional love that sits outside of time, and be transformed. Jesus did this, as Stephen Mitchell describes it, by shedding “all the mental claptrap and spiritual baggage that separates us from true life – [and so was] filled with the vivid reality of the Unnamable.” No wonder so many experienced him as magnetic. No wonder so many experienced him as terrifying. No wonder the disciples and the leaders of the early Christian church, who believed in his ministry but had no experience of it, created rather than shed so much doctrinal claptrap and ecclesiastical baggage -- unable to see beyond the old time-bound prophecies of a someday messiah, stuck in their historicity like bugs in amber, blind to the wisdom of Philo’s declaration that “the true name of eternity is today.”

Presence was what Joseph attained with Mary – a presence that transcended the wound of her adultery and all the cultural training that screamed for him to abandon her. He embodied the gospel of his stepson-to-be, strode into the Kingdom of God that had not yet been preached about. The newborn Jesus was the proof of Joseph’s transformation. A fact on the ground. Joseph gave Jesus a gift that his natural father could not possibly have given him: an extraordinary example of forgiveness, once again showing that the place of wound is always the place of nobility.

George Bernard Shaw warned about the kind of storytelling we've gotten into today. "If you tell any part of the story of Jesus in the vivid terms of modern colloquial slang," he admonished, "you will produce an extraordinary dismay and horror among the iconolaters. You will have made the picture come out of its frame, the statue descend from its pedestal, the story become real, with all the incalculable consequences that may flow from this terrifying miracle. It is at such moments that you realize that the iconolaters have never for a moment conceived of Jesus as a real person who meant what he said, as a fact, as a force like electricity."

"A real person who meant what he said, as a fact, as a force like electricity." This is the Jesus that makes my heart beat fast, like a lost brother showing up at my front door. The uncolorized story of his life gives me hope and inspiration. It is worth retelling and retelling -- to ourselves, to our children, to anyone who will listen -- like a fire being kept alive through the winter. May we always set aside a holy day for this remembrance.

AMEN.